henceforth be integrated into the Special Mission, which now consists of its Head, the Deputy Head, five political affairs officers and two military advisers, with the necessary international and local support staff.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

4. During the period under review, the Special Mission continued its efforts to bring about an immediate cessation of hostilities and a negotiated transfer of power in Kabul through the establishment of a fully representative and broad-based authoritative council.

5. In pursuit of these twin objectives, the former Head of the Special Mission returned to the region in mid-March and undertook a new series of consultations with Afghan leaders. He met President Burhanuddin Rabbani in Kabul; members of the Taliban Shura in Kandahar; the leader of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA), General Rashid Dostum, in Mazar-i-Sharif; the leader of the Hezb-i-Islami, Mr. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, in Jalalabad; the leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA), Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani, in Jalalabad and Islamabad; the leader of the Afghan National Liberation Front (ANLF) and former President, Prof. Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, in Peshawar; the leader of the Ittehad-i-Islami, Mr. Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, in Jalalabad; the Governor of Nangarhar province and head of the Eastern Zone Shura, Hajji Abdul Qadir, in Jalalabad; and several other Afghan personalities. He also met representatives of the Afghan Women's Network, who discussed the plight of Afghan women and their role in the peace process.

6. The Head of the Special Mission also consulted representatives of interested countries both in Kabul and Islamabad, including the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, Sardar Aseff Ahmad Ali, and the Assistant Secretary of State of the United States of America for South Asia, Ms. Robin Raphel. From 25 to 29 April 1996, the Head of the Special Mission travelled to Ashgabat for a meeting with the President of Turkmenistan, Mr. Safar Murat Niyazov, at the latter's invitation.

7. The efforts of the Special Mission to persuade the leaders of the three main warring factions - the Government, the Taliban and the Supreme Coordination Council (SCC) - to meet under the auspices of the United Nations were not successful. Despite his public announcement of his willingness to transfer power, Mr. Rabbani insisted that he could do so only to a representative council or an Afghan personality acceptable to all concerned parties. The Taliban, on the other hand, insisted on the immediate resignation of Mr. Rabbani as a precondition for any negotiations. SCC, and General Dostum in particular, also continued to demand the resignation of Mr. Rabbani as a first step towards a rapprochement. The rigid positions of these factions, reinforced by deep-seated suspicion and distrust, rendered fruitless all attempts to bring them together for meaningful talks.

IV. DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE REPORTING PERIOD

A. Military situation

8. Meanwhile, the military stalemate in Afghanistan continued despite occasional outbursts of fierce fighting around Kabul and elsewhere. The Taliban continued to control 14 provinces in the southern, south-eastern and south-western parts of the country; the Government controlled 5 provinces in the north-east; and General Dostum controlled 6 provinces in the north. The Hezb-i-Wahdat was confined to Bamyan and parts of Ghor province, while the Eastern Zone Shura, under Governor Qadir, held three eastern provinces.

9. The all-out assault on Kabul by the Taliban, which was widely expected to commence at the end of the winter, did not occur. The Taliban, however, continued to put pressure on Kabul by bombing it almost daily, with great loss of life among civilians. Clashes between the Government and Taliban troops also took place in various locations around Kabul. All appeals by the Special Mission to end these exchanges of missiles and aerial bombardment went unheeded.

10. Tension also continued in the province of Herat between the Taliban, who gained control of the province in September 1995, and the supporters of the former governor of the province, Mr. Ismael Khan.

11. The relative calm that had existed for several months in the north was disturbed by the assassination in Mazar-i-Sharif on 25 June 1996 of General Rasul Pahlawan, deputy to General Dostum and head of the armed forces of NIMA. Clashes were reported in the following days between the supporters of General Dostum and those of General Pahlawan. The general situation in Mazar-i-Sharif is tense, but appears to be gradually returning to normal as at the writing of the present report.

12. On several occasions, my representative briefed the Security Council on the continuing conflict in informal consultations. In a show of increasing concern about the predicament of Afghanistan and its people, the Security Council held two formal meetings on that subject on 9 April 1996. Twenty-eight delegations addressed the Council.

B. Intra-Afghan peace talks

13. Afghan leaders have maintained a dialogue among themselves in order to find a solution to the conflict, in some cases with the involvement of outside powers. Mr. Rabbani continued to express his willingness to meet and negotiate with his opponents, particularly the Taliban and General Dostum. At one point, he nominated a delegation to meet with the Taliban anywhere and anytime, under the auspices of the Special Mission. He also intensified discussions for a rapprochement with the head of the Hezb-i-Islami, Mr. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and with other Afghan leaders.

14. Early in April 1996, the Taliban indicated to the Special Mission that they were prepared to negotiate with any faction in Afghanistan, including the Government. As the Special Mission responded to this positive but short-lived

change of policy, the Taliban began to set preconditions for talks with Mr. Rabbani that made it impossible for any serious negotiations between the two sides to take place. Efforts by the Special Mission to modify these conditions were not successful. The Taliban continued to demand a prior transfer of power by Mr. Rabbani.

15. A major breakthrough in Mr. Rabbani's efforts to broaden the base of his Government was the signing on 24 May 1996 of a six-point agreement with Mr. Hekmatyar. The agreement established a rapprochement between the two leaders, which led to the appointment of Mr. Hekmatyar as Prime Minister and his swearing-in on 26 June in Kabul. A number of ministerial positions were allocated to Hezb-i-Islami officials. The Taliban registered their disapproval of the alliance by a heavy rocket bombardment of Kabul on the day of the swearing-in, causing over 60 deaths and many injuries among the civilian population. Two days later, at the request of Younis Khalis, Nabi Mohammadi, Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi and Hajji Qadir, Mr. Rabbani travelled to Jalalabad to discuss the possibility of obtaining their support for the new Government headed by Mr. Hekmatyar.

16. For their part, the Taliban had invited some prominent Afghan leaders, including Nabi Mohammadi, Pir Gailani and Younis Khalis, for a meeting in Kandahar on 5 and 6 June, to discuss the formation of a united front against Mr. Rabbani. The gathering ended with the signing of a short statement demanding the resignation of Mr. Rabbani.

17. While remaining neutral in the conflict between Mr. Rabbani and the Taliban, General Dostum and SCC persisted in their refusal to negotiate with Mr. Rabbani unless he first relinquished power. Talks between SCC and the Taliban have been going on for several months but have not succeeded in establishing a joint political and military front against the Government.

V. OBSERVATIONS

18. The objectives of a durable cease-fire and a peaceful transfer of power, mandated by the General Assembly and vigorously sought by the Special Mission, are still far from being achieved. The warring parties' preference to seek their objectives by military means rather than peaceful negotiation appears deep and enduring. Although the intra-Afghan talks are to be welcomed, they have not yet brought the principal warring parties and others to the negotiating table. Meanwhile, the people of Afghanistan, who have repeatedly demonstrated to the Special Mission their desire for peace, continue to suffer in Kabul and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere.

19. There has been no decline in foreign interference in the Afghan conflict. All countries who are said to be involved deny that that is the case, while asserting vigorously that others are involved. Their inability to agree on how peace should be restored in Afghanistan continues to hamper the search for a political settlement. Nor has this foreign interference yet brought home to the Afghan leaders how much their and their country's interests suffer if they allow themselves to remain divided.

20. In these circumstances, there is clearly a need for an impartial third party to help the Afghan leaders resolve their differences and to encourage the neighbouring countries and others to work together to support that effort. That is the role of the United Nations and its Special Mission.

21. I therefore appeal strongly to the Afghan leaders and to the countries concerned to help the United Nations find effective ways to facilitate a peace process. The Afghan leaders should immediately suspend hostilities and commit themselves to effective negotiations. The foreign countries concerned should cease their interference in the internal matters of Afghanistan and should work impartially together to get the Afghan parties to choose the path of negotiation rather than war.

22. I would be remiss if I did not mention in this report the plight of former President Najibullah. April 1996 marked the fourth anniversary of his de facto confinement to the United Nations compound in Kabul. He cooperated with the United Nations in facilitating peace in April 1992 and his continuing ordeal remains a matter of great concern to me. I therefore repeat my plea to the authorities in Kabul, especially President Rabbani, Prime Minister Hekmatyar and Commander Massoud, to let Mr. Najibullah and his companions leave Afghanistan for another country of their choice.

23. Finally, I salute the efforts of Mr. Mahmoud Mestiri, who has led the Special Mission with distinction for more than two difficult years. As I said in the letter in which I regretfully accepted his resignation, I pay tribute to the services he has rendered to the United Nations and to the people of Afghanistan in arduous circumstances.